

Baseball in Kalamazoo (Since 1890)

The Dead Ball Era

“City league baseball wasn’t a namby-pamby affair in 1900. Some vicious battles were played.”

—*Kalamazoo Gazette*, 23 July 1950

A Rough and Rowdy Sport

By the late 1800s, baseball had become America’s favorite pastime—perhaps the most widely played sport in the country—and it had changed considerably. No longer a casual game reserved for the country club elite, baseball had become a rough and rowdy sport of the working class, where beer and cigars were seemingly required equipment, and ardent rivalries among local and regional teams were



Kalamazoo College Men's Baseball Team, c.1896

Kalamazoo College CACHE: College Academic and Historical Experience

commonplace. It was during this era that the American Association (1882 to 1891) earned its nickname “Beer and Whiskey League” for selling beer at games (four of the league’s owners were brewmasters), playing on Sundays (a 19th century taboo), and opening the sport to working-class spectators. Stories were told of competition between some teams becoming so intense at times that umpires were

compelled to bear arms, and the ultimate outcome of a hotly contested battle might well be decided with fists at the local watering hole after the game. “Baseball was a rough game,” recalled one veteran player, “we played hurt, we played hard, and even if a fight broke out no one was ejected.”

Baseball in Kalamazoo During the ‘Gay Nineties’

A significant number of early independent teams existed in Kalamazoo during the years around the dawn of the 20th century. Many local businesses maintained their own teams, and often a company’s very reputation was based more on the success of its baseball “nine” than on the business itself. Local and regional millworkers, factory workers, printers, machinists, boilermakers, cigarmakers, newspaper staff, and store clerks formed intense rivalries among themselves and with teams from surrounding communities. Henderson-Ames crossed bats with Lillie’s Cigar Company, W.E. Hill & Co. took on the Globe Casket Company, the Michigan Buggy Company challenged the Lull Carriage workers, the Sugar Beets played the Maccabees, the Printers went up against the Standard Wheel Works team, the Green Stockings hosted the Paw Paws, the Blues battled the Browns, the South Streets met the Daisies, and the Daily Telegraph waged war against the Evening News.

Eddie Mayo and the Sam Folz Nine (1890)

With Kalamazoo out of state league play for the time being, an ambitious young restaurateur and right fielder named Edward J. “Eddie” Mayo organized a new independent team during the early spring months of 1890, and sought sponsorship from Sam Folz, a leading local merchant and proprietor of Folz’ Excelsior clothing store. This new team, simply called the Sam Folz nine, would form the basis for Kalamazoo’s “next generation” of state league contenders and it featured several young new players, including pitcher/shortstop Steve Bowen, eighteen-year-old left fielder George Robischung (a plumber in business with former Una pitcher Tom Dorgan), brothers Cornelius and Michael Redmond, pitcher Charles “Charley” Prince, third baseman William “Billy” Hellar, right fielder Don McKinney, and others. Proceeds from many games that year went to benefit the newly founded Borgess Hospital.



Charlie Ganzel, 1887
Library of Congress

After two years of intense play, the Folz organization had established itself as a formidable opponent, and by 1892, the team was successfully challenging leading regional teams from Battle Creek, South Haven, and La Grange, Indiana. Bowen, Robischung, the Redmond brothers and others became team regulars, as did George, Joe, and John Ganzel, three of Kalamazoo’s famous Ganzel brothers.

The Famous Ganzel Brothers

Among Kalamazoo’s most famous nineteenth century ball players were the notorious Ganzel brothers;

Fred, Charlie, George, Joe, and John. These five brothers were recognized locally, statewide, and nationally as Michigan's "First Family" of baseball, indeed some of the most well-known and highly respected sports heroes of their day. Fred was once a member of the Philadelphia Nationals, Charlie was a star catcher for Detroit and Boston, and George was said to be one of the best semi-professional catchers and batters in Michigan, while Joe played with several state league teams, and "Big Jawn" was a superstar player/manager in Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and New York. Charlie's son, Foster Pirie "Babe" Ganzel, later enjoyed a long career in the majors, as well.

The 1893 Kalamazoos

In August 1893, team owner E.M. Bailey enlisted Ed Mayo to manage a new independent team called the Kalamazoos. The roster included several alumni from the previous year's Folz team, including captain Joe Ganzel at first base, Joe's twenty-year-old kid brother John Ganzel at short stop, Guy Bannister at third base, Fred Jones at second, Louis Snell in right field, A. Bender in center field, Cornelius "Con" Redmond in left field, Cliff Thomas and Charley Prince pitching, and Michael Redmond catching. The Kalamazoos opened the season in South Haven, where they easily defeated "the best base ball team on the lake shore" (Gazette), then returned to Battle Creek in September to take on the reigning state champions.

The Sam Folz Nine (1894)

Early the following spring, the Kalamazoo team was reorganized and sponsorship (along with the team name) reverted back to Sam Folz. By this time, John Ganzel was off to begin his major league career, but his older brother, George, had recently returned to Kalamazoo, and he joined the new Folz team at third base. Joe Ganzel was back at first base, Con Redmond returned in center field, George Robischung was back in left field, and the "battery" was once again Michael Redmond (catcher) and Charley Prince (pitcher). The 1894 Folz team also included some new players; Fred Jones, Guy Bannister, Dan McKinney, and others, plus still another Ganzel brother, Charlie, who was then entering his sixth season as a star catcher for the National League Boston Beaneaters (Braves). Much to the delight of his hometown family, friends and fans, Charlie Ganzel would happily lend the Folz team a hand whenever he was in town.

"Tight money does not affect baseball as it does some other things. Base ball is cheap and popular, and it is the best antidote against the blues and business troubles ever discovered."

—Kalamazoo Gazette, 9 February 1894

Weekly games at Lake View Park pitted the Folz nine against teams from Albion, Battle Creek, Allegan, South Haven, Plainwell and Cygnet, Ohio, plus a Fourth of July double header against the team from LaGrange, Indiana. Sam Folz withdrew his sponsorship of the Kalamazoo team after the LaGrange game

because of an apparent salary dispute, but the team was immediately reorganized as the “Kalamazoos,” and the season continued without interruption, including more hard fought battles against Grand Rapids, Battle Creek and Goshen, Indiana.

In late July, the Kalamazoos traveled to northern Michigan for a series of games in Traverse City, Bay View and Cadillac, then returned to Kalamazoo for a trio of games at the Lake View field against Jackson, and an exciting re-match with Battle Creek. Attendance at home games ranged from several hundred to well over a thousand as the Kalamazoos finished out the season with a winning record.

“Mr. Mayo's thorough knowledge of baseball and spirits in general is well known and he is noted for keeping harmony in a club and getting lots of good work out of his players. No better man could have been picked to govern the team on the field, at home or abroad, than Ed Mayo.”

—*Kalamazoo Telegraph*, 3 April 1895

The Kalamazoo Green Stockings (1894)

While the Kazoos were making the rounds on the semi-pro circuit, a tough new amateur team called the Kalamazoo Green Stockings emerged with manager Michael Redmond. First organized in May 1894, most likely as a result of the Kalamazoos/Folz reorganization, the Green Stockings included several leading players from the previous year's independent team; Con and Michael Redmond, Billy Hellar, Steve Bowen, Ed and Will O'Brien, George Robischung, James O'Meara, H. LaBelle, John Gaffney, and others. Some players, including Bowen, Hellar, Robischung, and the Redmond brothers, played for both the Green Stockings and the Sam Folz team as their schedules allowed. The Green Stockings competed successfully for three seasons (1894-96) against teams from Decatur, Dowagiac, Paw Paw, Berrien Springs, South Haven, Gobleville (Gobles), Schoolcraft, and Niles.

Michigan State League (1895)

By mid-December, talk had begun to circulate about the formation of a new Michigan State League, of which Kalamazoo was to become a part. Come March, manager Ed Mayo and secretary Oliver Hungerford announced that Hartman, Warner, Blanford, McKinney, Criger, Babbitt, Whaling, Derrick, and Van Geisen had already been signed, and they would all be joining Kalamazoo's newest state league team, once again called the Kazoos.

During the course of the 91-game 1895 season, the Kazoos took on such rivals as the Battle Creek Adventists, the Jackson Jaxons, the Adrian Demons, the Owosso Colts, the Port Huron Marines, and the Lansing Senators. The Kalamazoo team booked nearly 2,400 miles on the road that year, finishing the season with a 50-41 record and a solid third place finish in the league behind Adrian and Lansing.



Kalamazoo High School Baseball Team, 1894
Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo

Independent Play (1896-1899)

The Kazoos: 1896

Unable to maintain adequate financial support, the state league collapsed before the start of the 1896 season, so the Kalamazoo team again returned to independent play. Despite his team's independent status, manager Ed Mayo was fortunate in his ability to retain many of his top local and regional players, including second baseman Derby (captain), catcher Robinson, pitchers Harris and Prince, first baseman Allard, third baseman Billy Hellar, center fielder Dutton, right fielder Ed O'Brien, left fielder George Robischung, and shortstop Steve Bowen. Even without league status, the independent Kazoos managed to stir up plenty of excitement for the local fans as they took on powerhouse teams from Jackson, Grand Rapids, Otsego, Saginaw, Battle Creek, and Adrian's mighty Page Fence Giants.

Michigan State League: 1897

Another attempt was made to organize a Michigan State League in 1897 and, of course, Kalamazoo signed on, but the season proved to be a short one, indeed. In May, Ed Mayo was enlisted to manage the new Kalamazoo team, but by the end of June, Mayo and most of the rest of his team had moved on to Flint, and the entire league collapsed again soon after. Kalamazoo remained out of state league ball for nearly a decade.

Kalamazoo Victors: 1898

But the breakup of the Michigan State League did little to stop Kalamazoo's top ballplayers from

pursuing their craft. The independent Kalamazoo Victors kept the ballparks filled with intense play during the 1898 season against rival clubs from Schoolcraft, Hickory Corners, Paw Paw, Bloomingdale, and Delton, plus other Kalamazoo teams, including the Bryant Paper Mill team, the Red Stockings, and the Kalamazoo Unions. The Victors' roster included Carl Miller, Neal Ball, Jake Ball, George Robischung, Elmer Dygert, Roy Sergeant, Armstrong, McKee, and Conroy. The team finished the season with 13 wins, 5 losses, and one tie.

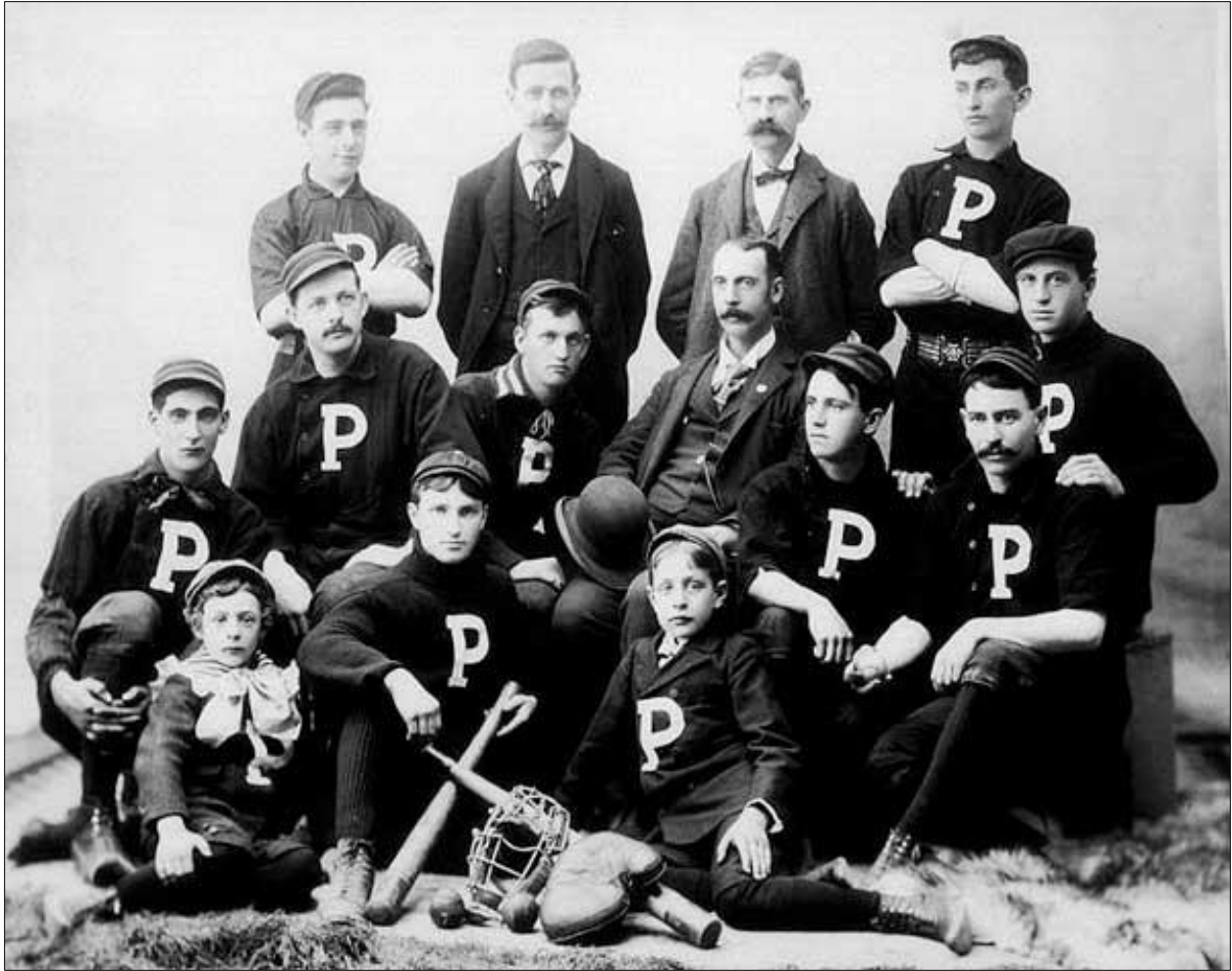
Kalamazoo Hubs: 1899

For the 1899 season, the Victors became "The Hubs," after the owners of The Hub restaurant in Kalamazoo supplied the team with new uniforms. Jake Ball remained manager and captain, with Sergeant, Robischung, Dygert, and McKee carrying over from the previous year's team, but adding Root, Hycoop, Prince, and Miller. In August, the team was reorganized again and several new players were signed. Robischung, Prince, and Neal Ball departed for the city league, and were replaced by Hastings, Calkins, and Sergeant. The Hubs were active for just a single season as they took on teams from Kalamazoo College, Battle Creek, Hastings, Otsego, Schoolcraft, Dowagiac, Allegan, Findlay (OH), South Bend (IN), and a traveling women's novelty team known as the Boston Bloomers.



Kalamazoo News Team, Kalamazoo, ca. 1896-97

Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo



Kalamazoo News Team, Kalamazoo, ca. 1896-97
Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo

Kalamazoo City League I (1899-1907)

In the absence of state league play, having just two or three semi-pro teams in town was simply not enough to keep Kalamazoo players and fans satisfied in 1899, so a city league of non-professional amateur teams was organized. After an initial meeting in June, the newly formed league was slated to include the Southworth Knights of Pythias lodge, the Kalamazoo Cycle Company, Lillie's Cigar Company, the postal clerks, the bank clerks, the Kalamazoo Corset Company, the Henderson-Ames Company, and the Gilmore Brothers. (Teams like the Hubs and the Folz Giants were not allowed to participate due to their professional or semi-pro status.) E.L. Fuller was elected league president, and C.A. Ford secretary and treasurer. By August, however, the league had narrowed to a field of ten teams: the Modern Woodmen, the Kalamazoo Cycle Company, the Morning Gazette, the Cigar Makers, the Evening News, the Southworth Knights of Pythias, The Cleenewercks, the Daily Telegraph, the Henderson-Ames Company, and Harrington Platters.

City league games began in early July, and most were held on the Kalamazoo College grounds. Near-daily battles ensued until September, with the Evening News, the Modern Woodmen and the Kalamazoo Cycle Company topping the ranks by season's end.



Unidentified player, c.1907
WMU Archives

For the 1900 season, the Kalamazoo City League featured just six clubs: the Kalamazoo Telegraph, the Kalamazoo Gazette, the Henderson-Ames company, the Union Label Printers, the Sam Folz team, and the Knights of Pythias. The Kalamazoo Telegraph Greys topped the league with a 15-5 win/loss record for the ten-week season, beating out the Gazette and the Union Label Printers, both of which finished at 12 and 8 on the season.

By 1901, financial pressure had begun to mount within the Kalamazoo City League. Although the players were unpaid amateurs, the costs associated with maintenance and promotion were inevitable. This caused league owners to become upset when spectators, who were apparently happy to enjoy their picnic lunches on the lawn while watching the games, displayed little interest in purchasing tickets or otherwise supporting the teams financially. Tempers flared as the league narrowed to just four teams: the Modern Woodmen, the Knights of Pythias, the Kalamazoo Telegraph, and the Sam Folz nine, the latter of which captured the trophy at the end of a hotly contested season. After three more seasons of play and just \$159 in its treasury, the Kalamazoo City League was dissolved in September 1904.

After a year off, the league was reorganized in 1906 with just four teams (Clark's, Henderson-Ames, Company C (Michigan National Guard), Sam Folz), and again in 1907 with five (Y.M.C.A., Sam Folz, Henderson-Ames, Kalamazoo Corset Company, Fishel's Dry Goods Store), but then folded again at the end of the second season.

Southern Michigan Association/League (1906-1914)

Kalamazoo White Sox

With the hope of organizing a new state league team, a new Kalamazoo Baseball Association (KBA) was formed in 1905, which gave the community "a chance to show whether it [would] support an independent team or not" (*Telegraph*). A new Kalamazoo team called the Kalamazoo White Sox was organized, with former Chicago boxing promoter E.J. Ryan as manager, H.D. Kools, president; and C.W. Pickell, secretary and treasurer. In a statement issued by Pickell and Kools, "Kalamazoo will certainly have as good a base ball team next year as any city in the state" (*Gazette*).

In December, it was announced that Kalamazoo would be joining a newly organized Michigan State League for 1906, along with teams from Grand Rapids, Lansing, Muskegon, Jackson, Ionia, Saginaw, and Flint, but that plan never exactly materialized. Instead, the (Class D) Southern Michigan Association was formed in the spring with six regional teams, which included the Kalamazoo White Sox.



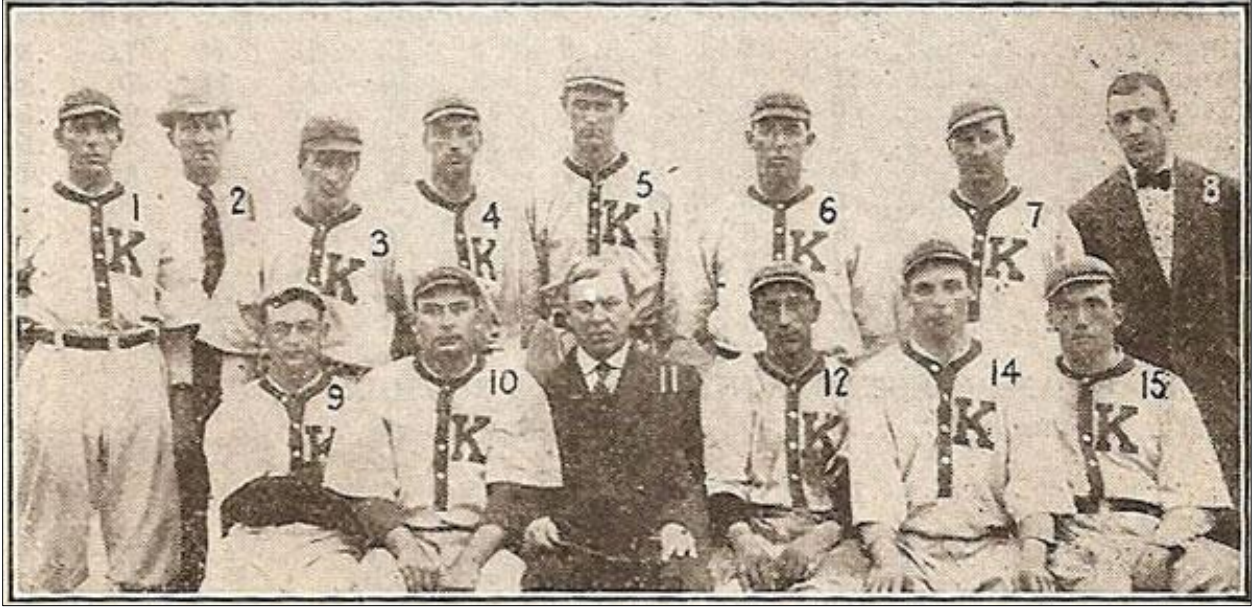
Kalamazoo White Sox, 1906

Author's collection

1. Bolin, 2. Felrath, 3. (unknown), 4. Parker (shortstop), 5. Webster, 6. Whalen, 7. Walsh (catcher), 8. Method (pitcher), 9. Myers, Jr. (mascot), 10. Myers (mgr), 11. Killiper (second), 12. Andrews (outfield)

Come March, eighteen players had been approached about joining the team, including three semi-professional pitchers from Chicago (Harry Leitman, Harley Parker and Bert Keely); “Doc” Beistle of Schoolcraft; George LaBelle, Neil Ball, Maurice Post, William Schrier, Wesley Clapp, Newton Root, Rufus Gilbert, Lee Hurd, John “Jack” Kilgore, M. Verberg, and Spaulding, all of Kalamazoo; plus Dan Kaufman of Charlotte; Pearl Edmons from Coxville, Indiana; and Alvord and Snow from the Nebraska Indians.

By the time the White Sox played the first game in April, however, the roster had changed considerably; only Beistle and LaBelle remained from the initial group. William “Bill” Hycoop had signed on as catcher, Ed Sergeant was at first base, Clifford “Mike” Webster at second base, Hoskins at third, Glenn “Doggie” Andrews at short stop, Clarence “Dusty” Miller was in right field, Lee “Baldy” Walker was in center field, “Buck” Reed was in left field, and Brown was a substitute. Ryan was soon replaced by KBA secretary and treasurer C.W. Pickell, who led the team to a moderately successful inaugural season. The White Sox won three out the four games against Charlotte, tied one and won another against Petoskey, won one and lost one against Jackson, and ultimately defeated Battle Creek to close the season.



Kalamazoo Team, Southern Michigan League, c. 1908

Author's collection

1. H. Taylor, 2. Waterman, 3. Hale, 4. Bell (captain), 5. Sage, 6. Furlong, 7. Andrews, 8. H. Frank (secretary), 9. Steimle, 10. Method, 11. J. Frank (president), 12. Cote, 14. E. Taylor, 15. Kelly

The Independent Kalamazoo Athletics

In April 1908, Clarence "Dusty" Miller, right fielder from the 1906 state league team, organized a new non-league independent team called the Kalamazoo Athletics, which was said to be "good enough in line-up to make something of a noise in state baseball circles" (Gazette). "Kling" Zholtzer was catcher for the Athletics; "Jap" O'Breiter, pitcher; "Chuck" Shafer, first base; "Dusty" Miller, second base; "Blokje" Smith, third base; "Ki" Wares, shortstop; "Ty" Kilgore, right field; "Rabbit" Clark, center field; and "Jude" Kilgore, left field, with "Doggie" Andrews and George Thomas filling in on occasion. Unfortunately, the only "noise" the Athletics managed to make came from the applause for their opponents. The Athletics lasted just a single, virtually winless season at the hands of rival teams from Battle Creek, Lawton, and Bloomingdale.



Kalamazoo Athletics playing in Bloomingdale, 31 July 1908.

Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo

1910 State Championship

After three years of play, though still without a pennant, the Kalamazoo White Sox needed a change. In a contest organized by the Kalamazoo Gazette, locals were asked to submit nicknames for Kalamazoo's 1909 Southern Michigan League team. The fan's choice this time around was, once again, the Kalamazoo Kazoos.

Bright new uniforms and a new team name apparently did the trick. The Kazoos topped the league in 1910, and beat the Lansing Senators in a seven game championship series. This would be Kalamazoo's second state league title.



Kalamazoo Team, Southern Michigan League Champions, c. 1911

Author's collection

1. Streeter, 2. Smith, 3. Cote, 4. Jacobson, 5. Kiefel, 6. Gillen, 7. Doty, 8. Mannix, 9. Negelson, 10. Anderson, 11. Pokoney, 12. J.W. Ryder (president), 13. Charles Wagner (manager), 14. Charles Blaney (secretary), 16. Hughey

What's in a Name?

The Kalamazoo team underwent numerous changes during the early teens. The White Sox became the Kazoos in 1909, then the Celery Pickers in 1911 (Kalamazoo was, of course, famous at the time for growing celery). The Celery Pickers then became the Celery Champs in 1912, and finally back to the Kazoos again in 1913. Despite all the changes, Kalamazoo enjoyed a nine year run with the Southern Michigan League, but by the end of the 1914 season, the steam had evidently run out. After a dismal year, Kalamazoo finished 8th of 10 in the league with a 23-45 record. By mid-September, the season was over, the team members had scattered, and so it seems had the fans. "Not one fan," lamented the Kalamazoo Gazette, "has raised his voice in demand for a club in 1915."



Humphrey Company Baseball Club, Kalamazoo Commercial League Champions, 1915

Local History Room

Pictured: (top row L-R) H. Brink, Dorsey, Johnson, Simmons

(middle) Ernest, Lemke (manager), J. Brink

(front) Neary, Clark, Skinner, Jones, Baker

Kalamazoo City League II (1910-1919)

While the Kazoos were carrying out their battles in the Southern Michigan League, 1910 saw the revival of the Kalamazoo City League. City League games had been immensely popular among the working class during the years around the turn of the century. Thanks to the 4:30 pm start times and shorter five-inning games, working class families were able to attend more often. Admission was cheap and the schedule ambitious. Games were held every weekday afternoon; Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday games were free of charge, while admission on Thursdays and Fridays was just 10¢, a bargain even in those days. But in the absence of strong leadership, teams and players became disenchanted and the league eventually fell apart.



Jack Ramby, c. 1910

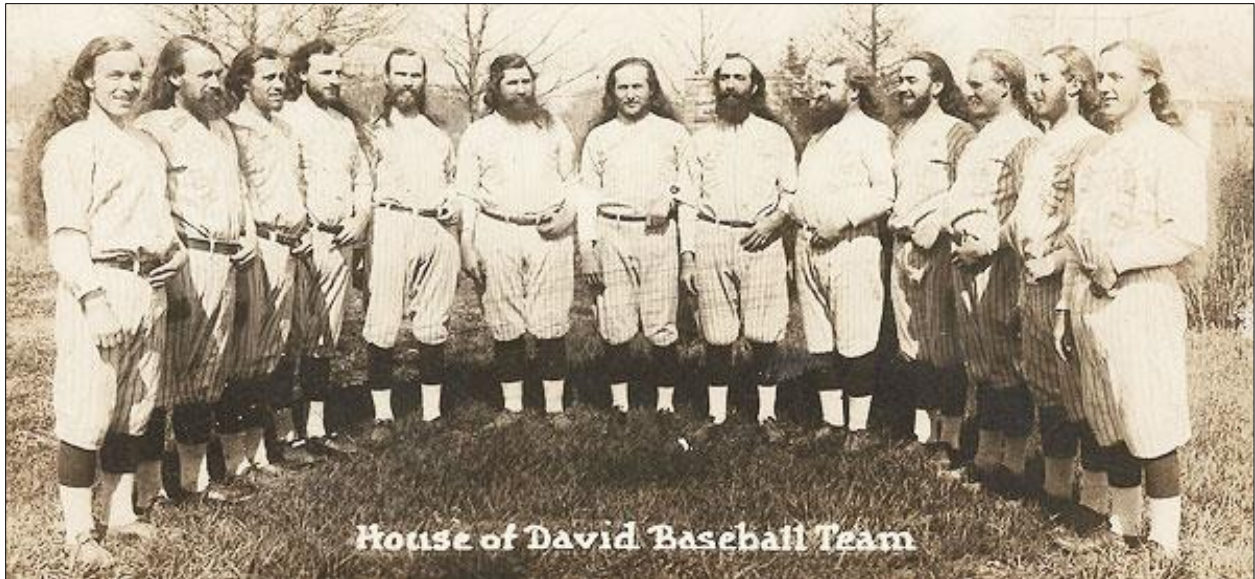
Enthusiasm was strong again in 1910, however, and by May the new Kalamazoo City League was complete. Jack Ramby was elected president of the league, John H. Ryan was vice president, and six teams were organized; The Merchants Publishing Company, The Eagles, The Clarks, The Kalamazoo Laundry Company, The Kalamazoo Press, and The (Western Normal School) Cubs.



Goodale Eagles at Oakwood Park, 1919.

Local History Room

Pictured: (seated L-R) McGregor, Lynn Ramsdell, "Farmer" Pierce, Mucile, "Doc" Bullard, Walt Schippers, "Toots" Vandenberg, Pete Mosher, Fred Spergeon, Frank Simmons
Standing (left) Joe Stohrer, others unidentified



House of David baseball team postcard, c.1920s.

photo courtesy, Wally Jung, Southwest Michigan Postcard Club

The Kalamazoo City League enjoyed reasonable success throughout the nineteen teens, and rivalries among the local and regional independent teams remained strong, even as the state league withered. Among the most popular teams of the 1916 season were the Maxwells, led by Eli Blackport; the Strands, led by former Kalamazoo White Sox outfielder “Dusty” Miller; the Paper Mill Allstars, led by “Toots” Vandenburg; and the East Kazoos, led by Chuck Guilfoyle. The fifteen-week season ran from late May through Labor Day, with a more manageable schedule of games on Thursdays, Sundays, and holidays.

Independent teams like the Strands, the Hawthorne Independents, the Kalamazoo Paper Mill All-Stars, and Joe Stohrer’s Goodale Eagles (later the Goodale Kazoos) took command of a new field at Oakwood Park from 1916 until after the First World War. In fact, by the end of the 1919 season, the Goodale Kazoos had become a strong statewide contender, successfully taking on teams like the American Oils of Jackson, the Lansing Reos, the South Bend Studebakers, and the Paige Detroits.

The Stationery Independents (1913)

During the spring of 1913, the Kalamazoo Stationery Company formed an independent baseball team and began seeking games against “any fast independent clubs in the city or nearby towns” (*Gazette*). The “Stationers” were a strong team, led by Vandenburg, the pitcher, and catcher Yucker, with Spurgeon at first base, Wilkinson at second, Hotop at third, Brown at shortstop, J. Tatro in left field, F. Tatro in right field and Seward in centerfield. The club took on the Vine Street Independents, the Third Street Independents, and the North Side Seconds, then traveled to neighboring towns like Williams (now a ghost town west of Alamo), Vicksburg, Gobleville (Gobles), Plainwell, and Three Rivers, before closing the season on Labor day with a game in Chicago.

Central League (1920-1922)

Buoyed by success of the 1919 Stationery Independents, local businessman E. M. Sergeant spearheaded an effort in the early months of 1920 to organize a new team called the Celery Pickers, which would ultimately join Michigan's newly reorganized Class B Central League, along with teams from Grand Rapids, Ludington and Muskegon. In February, Sergeant signed a contract with "one of the best known baseball men in America" (*Gazette*), Harry T. "Rube" Vickers, to manage the new Kalamazoo team.

Vickers was immediately dispatched to Chicago, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York to recruit the best available players he could find. With the aid of professional baseball mogul Connie Mack and chief scout Henry L. Turner (a former Battle Creek pitcher), Vickers returned to Kalamazoo with the contracts in hand; W.G. Collier, Ben Egan, Tommy Caesar, Roy Heidelberg, George Tomer, W. B. Stevens, Alex Schaufele, and others. "Without fear of contradiction," Vickers stated, "I am prepared to say it is the best minor league club that ever represented any city in Michigan and will be prepared to show Kalamazoo a class of baseball it has never seen before" (*Gazette*).



George Tomer

After a slow and contentious start to the season, Vickers was released in late June and first baseman George Tomer took over as manager. Tomer, who had a long history in the minor leagues, and was especially popular among the locals, guided the Celery Pickers to a 64-60 record for the season.

The following year, the Central League added Jackson/Ionia and Lansing. Kalamazoo finished the 1921 season with a respectable 69-58 record, placing second in the league. A year later, manager Grover Prough led the team through much of the regular 1922 season, resulting in a fourth place finish for Kalamazoo.

Michigan-Ontario League (1923-1924)

Come fall, Martin H. "Marty" Becker, "a player with a long and glorious career in the minors" (Springfield (MA) Republican), signed on to play third base and manage the Kalamazoo team during the remainder of the 1922 postseason. To cap off the year, Becker organized an exhibition game in September against the National League Chicago Cubs, the first time that a major league team had played in Kalamazoo since 1886 when the Chicago White Stockings were in town. Some 2,500 fans "jammed their way into Stationery Park" (*Gazette*) to watch the Kalamazoo team take on the Cubs. Although Chicago beat the Kazoos 2-0, it was a hard fought battle and an exciting game. "All in all," said the *Gazette*, "the day was a big success."



“Joneszy & Bill” on the Kalamazoo College grounds, c. 1917.
Bertram MacGregor Scrapbook, Kalamazoo College Archives

The following spring, Kalamazoo joined the Michigan-Ontario League, competing against the Bay City Wolves, the Flint Vehicles, the Grand Rapids Billbobs, the Hamilton Tigers, the London (Ontario) Techumsehs, the Muskegon Anglers, and the Saginaw Aces. Kalamazoo remained in the league through the 1924 season.

Michigan State League (1926)

After a year out of league play, the Kalamazoo Kazoos returned in 1926 as a member of the Michigan State League, once again taking on teams from Saginaw, Bay City, Port Huron, Charlotte/Flint, Grand Rapids, Ludington and Muskegon. The league itself was created in mid-June out of a merger between the (Class C) Central League and the (Class B) Michigan-Ontario League, but the season was disappointing all the way around. Managed by Fred Hutton and Boss Schmidt, the Kazoos finished second from the bottom of the league with a 39-59 record, while the league itself only lasted the one season. This would be the end of professional men’s league play in Kalamazoo for some seventy years.

Kalamazoo City League III (1924-1989)

Despite the extended break from professional state league play, Kalamazoo fans were still wild about the sport of baseball. Even the mayhem of two World Wars and the challenges of the Great Depression did little to stop Kalamazooans from pursuing their favorite warm weather sport. In 1924, baseball supporter Pete Moser rekindled a third run of the Kalamazoo City League, which would span an

unprecedented 66 seasons. At its peak during the 1950s, the Kalamazoo City League boasted 40 to 50 teams in several divisions each season. With the inclusion of fast pitch and slow pitch softball for both men and women, the 1976 season saw nearly 300 teams playing recreational baseball in Kalamazoo.



Sutherland Paper Company baseball team, photographed 20 June 1946 by Ward. C. Morgan
WMU Archives and Regional History Collections

Sutherland Paper Company: 1946 State Champions

One of the leading teams during the postwar period was sponsored by the Sutherland Paper Company. Team manager Ivan Forster, who was working his way up the administrative ladder at Sutherland, built the company's championship baseball team with support from company president (and avid sports fan) Louis W. Sutherland. The Sutherland company began sponsoring teams during the late 1930s and ultimately laid claim to 18 Kalamazoo City League championships, seven state amateur championships (six consecutive), and two national titles.

Sutherland began to reach its peak during the late 1940s when the team landed its first state title in 1946. “It was not an easy job,” explained former player Ivan Forster in a 1999 *Gazette* article, “all the city league players at that time had to work at the place they represented in the league... It was a year-round process, lining up college players for summer jobs and getting others who were not in college on our payroll.” During postseason tournament play, however, teams were allowed to add a few “extras” to the roster, often in the form of seasoned players, even professionals. In July 1948, a massive crowd was on hand to see the Sutherlands take on the Chicago White Sox in an exhibition game at the Western Michigan College of Education (WMU) Hyames Field (Robert J. Bobb Stadium).

“The sort of talent that existed on these company teams, Sutherland and others — from the 1930s into the mid-50s, when Louis Sutherland stopped sponsoring a team — was nothing you’ll find in the rare baseball city league of today.”

—*Kalamazoo Gazette*, 30 September 2011

Amateur National Baseball Championships: 1949 & 1951

During the late 40s, Lacosta “Punk” Smathers replaced Ivan Forster as field manager, and ultimately led the Sutherland team to a pair of Amateur Baseball Congress Stan Musial World Championships.

1949 was “an amazing season” (*Gazette*) for the Sutherland team. The Papermakers won 46 games in a row during the regular season, and finished with a 53-5 overall record. Sutherland then went on to win 16 of the 18 games played during the postseason playoffs, including the national championship ABBC Little World Series. Not to be outdone, Sutherland repeated the feat two years later, winning a second national amateur title in 1951. The Sutherland company (later KVP Sutherland, the Brown Company, and then James River) sponsored teams in the Kalamazoo City League through the 1955 season.

Kalamazoo Amateur Baseball Association

By the 1980s, however, city league baseball in Kalamazoo was in trouble. From its peak of popularity during the 1950s and a strong resurgence of participation during the 1970s, the league barely managed to survive the 1981 season with just three teams. Renewed efforts and the incorporation of the Kalamazoo Amateur Baseball Association (KABA) kept amateur baseball afloat for a few more seasons, but after 1989, the Kalamazoo City League was no more.



Kalamazoo Lassies, c. 1950
Kalamazoo Valley Museum photo

The Kalamazoo Lassies (1950-1954)

Men's teams weren't the only ones making news in the local sports pages during the postwar years. During the late 1940s, the Kalamazoo Lassies were one of the more popular teams in the All-American Girls Professional Baseball League (AGBL), and they enjoyed a five-season run in Kalamazoo. But the AGBL had already peaked by the time the Lassies came to town, and by 1954 the league was in its final season. In September of that year, the Kalamazoo Lassies defeated the Fort Wayne Daisies by a score of 8-5 to win the league championship in what would be the final game of the AGBL. The 1992 film, *A League of Their Own*, was a fictionalized account based on the real-life All-American Girls Professional Baseball League.

Frontier League (1996-1998): Kalamazoo Kodiaks

Another forty years had come to pass when in 1996 the Frontier League's Mid-Missouri Mavericks moved to Michigan to become the Kalamazoo Kodiaks, marking the local community's much anticipated return to professional baseball. Despite a lackluster 25-49 opening season and a fourth place finish in the Western Division, the Kodiaks still managed to draw more than 62,000 fans, a strong testament indeed to the popularity of baseball in Kalamazoo.

After two more tough seasons for the Kodiaks at the very bottom of the league standings, the team moved again and became the London (Ontario) Werewolves. Still, attendance had remained strong, and the overall popularity of the Kalamazoo Kodiaks was enough to inspire local investors to make significant improvements to the team's home field at Sutherland Park (later named Mayors' Riverfront Park).

Frontier League (2001-2010): Kalamazoo Kings

In 2001, Kalamazoo returned to the Frontier League with a new team, the Kalamazoo Kings. The Kings were part of the league's Eastern Division, and unlike many others, they were not affiliated with a major league team.

The opening season got off to a rough start for the Kings with a 25-50 record, but things slowly began to improve. Despite its lackluster scoring record, the Kings were named Frontier League Organization of the Year for being the third Frontier League franchise to exceed 100,000 fans in a single season. In fact, the Kings topped 100,000 in attendance every year they were in the league, one of only a handful of teams to do so. With more than 135,000 fans in attendance during the 2004 season, the Kings shared the league's Organization of the Year award, then went on to take the Frontier League Championship Series in 2005 and the Division Series in 2008.

After a ten-season run with two division titles, three playoff appearances, and one league championship, the Kings closed up shop at the end of the 2010 season.

Northwoods League (2014): The Kalamazoo Growlers



2014 marked the exciting return of professional baseball to Kalamazoo with the arrival of the Northwoods League and the Kalamazoo Growlers. The Growlers are 2nd year members of the Northwoods League, the country's premier summer collegiate baseball league. The league has expanded to 18-teams in Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, Michigan, and Canada, giving collegiate players the opportunity to experience what life as a minor or major league player is like. The team plays an

extensive 70+ game schedule each season, with the opportunity to play with some of the best collegiate players from all across the country.

Continuing Research

Like many of our Local History essays, this article is by no means a definitive study; rather it may be viewed as a work-in-progress. If you have new information, corrections, or items to share, please contact the author or the Local History Room.

Portions of this article were published on the official Kalamazoo Growlers website in 2013.

Written by Keith Howard, Kalamazoo Public Library Staff, 2014.

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